

Functional Fitness - Personal trainers no luxury for seniors struggling to stay mobile

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LONGMONT – Seniors may spend their money on everything from a nice car to birthday presents for the grandkids.

But in 2005, decades after the fitness craze swept the nation, hiring a personal fitness trainer might still seem like something best left to movie stars.

The perception that such trainers are a frivolity comes from hype about whittling bikini-perfect waistlines and building so-called mirror muscles – ones that bulge or ripple in eye-catching places.

But this perception is not reality, according to Phil and Kylie Booth, owners of Senior Wellness Consultants Inc. in Longmont.

The couple – she’s an occupational therapist; he’s a recreation therapist – launched their company seven years ago to promote functional fitness to seniors struggling with mobility

Isn’t all fitness ultimately functional?

Yes, but this type of fitness focuses on the three key movements that can make or break the mobility that seniors need to stay independent, said Becky McLean, an occupational therapist with Senior Wellness Consultants.

Primary mobility means being able to walk, get out of a chair and get out of bed. “If you can do those three things, you are independent,” she said.

Trainers often need to break down and exaggerate the steps of a movement that younger people may take for granted.

McLean outlined the common sit-to-stand activity in four steps:

Step 1: Scoot forward to chair’s edge.

Step 2: Tuck feet under.

Step 3: Cross hands over chest and put “nose over toes.”

Step 4: Stand up.

Practicing such practical movements – in addition to working on building strength, endurance and flexibility – can support senior mobility and confidence, said Kylie Booth, 36.

And you're never too old to get started. "If you continue challenging yourself, you can always make improvements," she said.

That philosophy motivated the Booths to brand the SAGE program — Seniors Aging Gracefully with Exercise — to better reach elders who need more encouragement and supervision.

The effort can pay off big.

According to the American Senior Fitness Association, a physically fit 70-year-old can be as strong as an unfit 30-year-old.

Fitness benefits can also slow physiological decline past middle age from 2 percent to about 0.5 percent per year, ASFA statistics show.

With data like that, plus the common knowledge that fitness can prevent some chronic diseases, would anyone contest senior fitness?

Turns out seniors themselves sometimes do, according to Gwen Hyatt, a Tucson, Ariz.-based senior fitness spokeswoman for the American Council on Exercise. She can rattle off a long list of excuses seniors use, including obesity, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, heart bypass surgery, arthritis, stroke and the like.

"But I don't buy into all the barriers people think they have," she said. "There is no chronic condition that can exclude you from (some form) of exercise. I haven't found one yet."

A functional fitness routine will likely not involve marathon training. But it can be tailored to the activities of daily life, ranging from lifting pots to high kitchen shelves to carrying 20 pounds of groceries to reaching behind to hook or unhook a bra, Hyatt said.

Seniors, more than any other segment of American society, need an appropriate fitness routine, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

The federal government recommends that adults exercise moderately 30 minutes or more at least five days a week. But CDC data show that only 35 percent of men and 27 percent of women who are 65 or older met that standard in 2000. Some seniors need what programs like SAGE offer: a focused, supervised home-exercise program, because working out is a novel concept.

"A lot of times a daughter will say, 'Mom, you really need this,'" said Phil Booth, 33. "But the mom hasn't ever exercised."

Local gyms with senior programs can be too intimidating, too distant or too impersonal for this type of senior, he added.

Senior Wellness Consultants bridges the gap by dispatching McLean and a half-dozen other personal fitness trainers — all of them certified through the American Senior Fitness Association in New Smyrna Beach, Fla. — to local homes and some senior resident facilities.

Their gray-haired clients range in age from 59 to 102 and present an even broader spectrum of goals, Phil Booth said.

Some hope just to get out of bed safely, he said. Others aim to get back to hiking. Bob Murphy, a retired IBM manager living at The Bridge Assisted Living at Life Care Center of Longmont, at one time didn't have any fitness goals, he said. These days, though, he faithfully exercises with McLean for 45 minutes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons.

"I got kids who told me I had to," said Murphy, 81.

McLean shadows him as he lifts free weights, stretches rubber bands and rides a stationary bicycle. She also puts a gentle hand on his back and elbow as the two rock step to practice safely shifting their weight.

Murphy struggles with his balance, and these supervised activities have helped him improve his stability, he said.

"It's like dancing," he added, brightening a moment before getting back to his exercises.

Depending on a trainer's travel time, Senior Wellness Consultants charge between \$45 and \$55 to make a 45-minute house call.

The niche business keeps growing, Booth said, but their satisfaction goes well beyond their bottom line.

"It's rewarding because you're helping someone get out of a wheelchair and walk," Kylie Booth said.

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